



al Yankovic

getting inside his 'weirdness' head

by Jeff Bliss



I wanted to write the consummate "Boy, isn't Weird Al Yankovic really weird?" story, penning a humorous account of the Cal Poly architecture alumnus who has gained more recognition for his music parodies than for any architectural renderings.

I discovered, however, that on stage, in music videos, in films, and on television, **Alfred Mathew Yankovic's (ARCH '80)** reputation for manic craziness has not just been

well-earned, but also well-cultivated. Off stage, the "King of the Parodies" is low-key and thoughtful, a stark contrast to the

"Weird Al" persona that has earned him near-cult status and record sales in the millions.

homecoming

The limousine carrying Yankovic and his assistant wends its way through downtown San Luis Obispo. Curled up in the corner of the cavernous back passenger seat, Yankovic, 40, sports his trademark slip-on tennis shoes, a pair of black pants, and a lime-green pullover shirt. As the car passes the Marsh Street storefronts, he waxes nostalgic.

"When I was going to Cal Poly, [San Luis] wasn't as tidy," he says wistfully. "It had its funny quirks and character to it. Like the ['uniquely' decorated] bathrooms over at the Madonna Inn."

There are no bizarre impersonations of San Luis Obispo folks he used to know. No crazy stories of strange things he

and fellow students used to do. No breaking into funny songs about "SLO Town." Just a calm, cool, and collected Yankovic taking it all in. (Later, however, he tells his appreciative audience at the Performing Arts Center on campus, "Playing here brings back a lot of memories — like licking the walls of Bubble Gum Alley.")

The two-time Grammy-winning Yankovic, back at Cal Poly for only the second time since graduating, isn't just riding around in the back of a big, fancy car. Every stop along his 80-date tour is an opportunity to promote "Running with Scissors," his



(Stage photos by Tony Hertz.
Portrait by Johnny Buzzerio.)

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15th album since 1983. (A World Wide Web site lists a complete discography of legitimate and bootleg recordings, songs, and live tracks, including "an audio presentation" made on campus at Cal Poly's 1979 Week of Welcome.)

Today Yankovic will visit three radio stations — including Cal Poly's KCPR, where he got his start — and the local NBC affiliate, KSBY-TV. He will answer the same questions repeatedly, honor each request by a DJ or reporter to exhibit his trademark "Weird" side, and respond patiently to radio callers.

City after city, doesn't it all get old? Doesn't the road wear on him? Doesn't it cut into his artistic forays (which now include directing other artists' non-parody music videos)?

"Not really," he says. "When I'm on the road, my brain is kind of on vacation. I don't find myself scrawling lyrics while I'm on the tour bus. I don't resent the touring. It's a break from working on albums."

beginnings

The only child of Nick and Mary Yankovic, Yankovic grew up in the Los Angeles suburb of Lynwood. On his seventh birthday, his parents gave him an accordion. Seven years later, in 1973, he submitted his first song, "Pico and Sepulveda," to Dr. Demento, a nationally syndicated disc jockey known for playing comedy and novelty music.

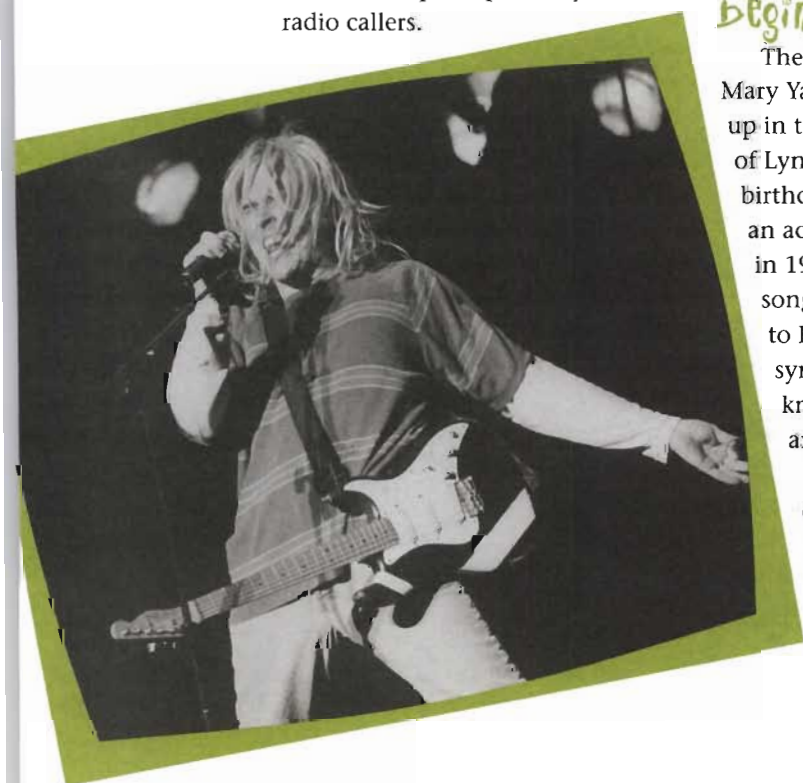
Demento found a certain charm in the "accordion-powered ditties" Yankovic recorded on a cheap

cassette player in his bedroom. By 1976, and still in high school, Yankovic had made his first live appearance in Demento's touring stage show, playing his ode to family car rides, "Belvedere Cruising," and was

becoming a "name player" among a group of budding satirists and comedians.

At about the same time, on the advice of his high school guidance counselor, class valedictorian Yankovic enrolled at Cal Poly. Just 16, he may have found himself far from familiar surroundings, but never from his accordion and a desire to take other artists' songs and "pep them up a bit."

In 1979, he got his first big break. The power pop album "Get the Knack" included the hit single "My Sharona," a catchy No. 1 tune practically asking for a parody. Yankovic set up a mini recording studio adjacent to KCPR in the men's bathroom — renowned for its "famed" acoustics



(read: echoes) — and recorded his first record release, "My Bologna." He recalls, with a touch of irony, being signed by Capitol Records — "The Beatles' label!"

A year later, he won international acclaim with "Another One Rides the Bus," his parody of Queen's No. 1 single, "Another One Bites the Dust."

"I started getting calls from all over," he says. "It wasn't just Dr. Demento. I was getting calls about the song from Australia and Europe. It was big."

Three years after receiving his bachelor's degree, Yankovic recorded his first full album. Nine more studio albums (with several compilations and a box set) followed, resulting in 11 million albums sold, making him

the most successful
comedy

recording artist ever. After two Grammy awards and six nominations, he continues to perform on MTV, at major concert venues, and on other network TV series and specials on Showtime and the Disney Channel.

back to cal poly

"It was funny doing 'Behind the Music' for VH-1," Yankovic says. "Those documentaries usually chronicle the ups and downs of bands. How they made it big. How they fell off the charts. How they got caught up in drugs and alcohol. And then how they got cleaned up and made a comeback."

"For my piece, the worst that

could be said was, 'Well, the last album sold a few hundred thousand less copies.'" He laughs. "I mean, if that's the worst thing . . ."

The worst thing to be said about Yankovic is probably that his frenetic pace playing state fairs, amphitheaters, and concert stages would kill a mere mortal. One minute he's pressing the flesh at SLO rock station KZOZ-FM (where he did a stint during his Cal Poly days as weekend DJ "Al Matthews") and the next minute he's conducting an exacting sound check at the performance hall. Then he's out the door for a return to his roots in a live interview at KCPR. Then back to the stage for a sold-out show.

"Eventually, I'd like to do more directing. I'm enjoying working on other people's videos," he says. "I've even thought about

[directing] feature films, and have been offered a couple of scripts.

"I think it's safe to say I won't be going into architecture," he adds, smiling. "I recently used my training to remodel my kitchen, but that's as far as it gets. Studying architecture definitely helped me become a more analytical, disciplined person, but I didn't love [it like the other students]. They'd see a building



and [say]: 'Oh, the form is following the function.' And I'm thinking, 'Yeah, big deal — it's a house!'

"I enjoy what I do [now], and I'm glad people enjoy what I do," Yankovic says. "It's great to have them singing along, laughing."

"Of course it's not all just fun and games," he adds. "There's a lot of work."

He smiles again.

"But it's better than flipping burgers." **CP**

